

News Analysis

STATINTL

Nixon Seems To Be Ignoring Lesson: Bombing Didn't Work

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 28—As President Richard M. Nixon relies increasingly on United States air power in Indochina, he appears to be ignoring a lesson learned by the Johnson Administration: It didn't work.

The generalized explanation of the current round of heavy bombing raids against North Vietnam given yesterday by Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird served, moreover, to deflect public discussion from the key question of effectiveness.

All he would say in his year-end press conference, which turned out to be largely a discussion of current bombing attacks, was that they were "necessary military actions to protect the remaining forces in South Vietnam."

Other military sources added little to Laird's explanation. An unidentified senior Pentagon official was quoted by the New York Times as saying:

"Look, these so-called reinforced protective-reaction strikes amount to a limited selective resumption of the bombing. They are limited in time and in geographic area. But, as the President and Mr. Laird have said repeatedly, we don't intend to allow Hanoi to take advantage of our troop drawdown to threaten a rout against those who remain. Every once in a while we feel we have to remind Hanoi of this."

Two crucial issues that figured in the failure of the Johnson Administration's Rolling Thunder program, which started in 1965 and was halted in 1968, have not yet been subjected to serious public discussion in connection with Mr. Nixon's intermittent raids against the North.

First, there is the question of whether such raids can stem the infiltration of men and supplies from North Vietnam or break the will of the North Vietnamese to continue the war.

As the Pentagon Papers have disclosed, then Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara returned from one of his periodic trips to Vietnam in October 1966 with the gloomy report to President Lyndon B. Johnson that the bombing had neither significantly reduced infiltration nor diminished Hanoi's will to continue the fight.

Analysts at the Central Intelligence Agency and a group of independent scientists brought together by the Institute for Defense Analyses supported McNamara's view that the bombing tended to strengthen morale in North Vietnam rather than weaken it.

They concluded also that, although the bombing could reduce somewhat the capacity of North Vietnam's supply lines to the South, the remaining capacity still would be more than enough to supply communist troop needs.

McNamara stated his conclusion publicly before a joint session of the Senate Appropriations and Armed Services Committees:

"I don't believe that the bombing up to the present has significantly reduced, nor any bombing that I could contemplate in the future would significantly reduce, the actual flow of men and materiel to the South."

There was some dissent at the CIA. George Carver, the CIA's leading Indochina specialist, wrote a memorandum for Director Richard Helms generally concurring with McNamara's view that the number of sorties should not be increased further but differing with his judgment, that nothing could help the bombing program.

"We continue to judge that a bombing program directed both against closing the port of Haiphong and continuously cutting the rail lines to China could have a significant impact," Carver wrote.

But the Johnson Administration was not prepared to risk war with China and Russia by so substantial an escalation.

A second issue that figured in the failure of Rolling Thunder was the moral question of bombing civilians.

President Johnson denied at first that the American warplanes were hitting anything other than steel and concrete. North Vietnamese charges that the targets included hospitals, churches and civilian communities were largely discounted until Harrison Salisbury of the New York Times obtained a visa to North Vietnam and reported the results of the bombing from eyewitness observation.

In the present raids, Hanoi radio has reported that U.S. bombs have struck a hospital, schools and many civilian areas.

Whether these results, if confirmed, were intended or not is beside the point. Bombing is an inexact operation and innocent bystanders often are hit. When evidence of substantial civilian casualties mounted in the 1960s, officials of the Johnson Administration shifted from saying, "We're not doing it," to "They'd better get out of the way."

Whether Nixon bombs can be more effective than Johnson bombs remains to be seen, of course, but the indications thus far are not promising.

In the current raids, ordered partly in retaliation against the shooting down of four U.S. warplanes, the North Vietnamese have claimed six more U.S. planes.

And in Cambodia and Laos, where U.S. air power is being used to back up Cambodian, South Vietnamese, Laotian and tribal forces, the Communists have been pushing forward with increasing success.